

Analysis of the Influence of Opinion Leaders on Voting Decision of Rural Voters: An Evidence from Ayetoro, Ogun- State of Nigeria.

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Abstract: *Rural dwellers are believed to constitute the majority of mankind. It is also widely held that no credible election can take place without the informed participation of the rural voters. Unfortunately, most of the rural voters are not well-educated and, therefore, rely on information received from opinion leaders. The study examined the influence of opinion leaders on the voting decisions of the rural voters with a view to determining the nature of the influence, whether positive or negative. It was discovered that a number of the opinion leaders played very negative roles during the last election, thereby eroding the credibility of elections in the community that was studied. The study therefore, recommended that government and the civil societies need to put in place an efficient information delivery mechanism to reduce the over- bearing influence of opinion leaders in the rural communities.*

Keywords: *Influence, Opinion leaders, voting decisions, Rural voters*

I. Introduction

Elections and voting take place all over the world to elect new leaders, especially in a democratic setting. Politicians and political leaders all over the world would make use of every available means of persuasion to enlist the support of the electorates. The available means could be through the mass media or interpersonal relations.

The use of interpersonal relations became popular after the 1940 American Presidential Election when a study conducted by Lazarsfeld et al. as cited in Katz (1957), “that the flow and effect of mass communication messages may not be as direct as it was thought to be”.

The research by Lazarsfeld discovered that most people did not vote as a result of the information that the mass media gave to them. Rather, their decisions were influenced by what they were told by friends and associates. This discovery actually led to the Two-Step-Flow hypothesis which emphasized the influence of opinion leaders in voting decisions. This development has brought with it a lot of implications for a democratic society.

Corroborating this view, Katz (1957) said that the researchers “themselves were intrigued by its implications for a democratic society. It was a healthy sign, they felt, that people were still most successfully persuaded by give-and-take with other people and that the influence of mass media was less automatic and less potent than had been assumed”.

Since then, the influence of opinion leaders has been said to keep waxing despite other campaign efforts rigorously employed by the political class using both the traditional and social media.

Although, the Two-Step-Flow concept has been criticized for arrogating so much power to opinion leaders but their influence cannot be over emphasized in a rural setting where voters are predominantly illiterate more especially in a country like Nigeria where it is believed that there is so much gap between the information ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’. While city people may not be easily influenced by opinion leaders, rural voters are likely to be easily influenced because of their limited access to information.

Katz (2015) in his article, “where Are Opinion Leaders Leading Us” observed that people turn to opinion leaders for decisions ranging from politics to their personal lives and are almost at the mercy of opinion leaders. He opined that “today’s culture may have produced a new type of influential whom we have not encountered before”. Bennett and Manhein (2006) proposes that “new media are so tailored to our personal idiosyncrasies that we no longer need mediators or interpreters such as opinion leaders”. Some people believe that most opinion leaders that people look up to for arriving at voting decisions are themselves partisan and therefore not qualified to lead. That most of their opinions are absolutely subjective, therefore making people take wrong voting decisions. Some are also of the opinion that most of the opinion leaders have sold out by collecting gratifications from politicians, thereby deliberately misinforming the voters. This has further fuelled my agitation about this topic because a Pastor in Ayetoro town told this researcher that political leaders offered him N 100,000 to influence the voting decisions of his members. Some say because poverty is so much

pronounced in the land, that the supposed opinion leaders are the ones who help politicians distribute money to voters to vote even for the wrong candidate.

In view of the above-identified research problems, this research, therefore, has as its objective to examine the activities and current relevance of opinion leaders in a predominantly illiterate setting and how it has impacted, whether negatively or positively on our democratic experience. This is intended to help policy-makers and even stakeholders such as INEC in their quest to hold free and fair elections.

The relentless efforts devoted on this piece of paper is justified on the ground that there are a lot of studies on the influence of opinion leaders, very insignificant proportion of the available studies is on their influence at the rural level. This research work is set to fill this knowledge gap by focusing on the rural areas. Consequently, the rest of the paper is organized as follows: the second section reviews the extant relevant literature. The third section focuses on the methodology employed by the paper. The fourth section present and analyses that data. Finally, the fifth section gives the concluding remarks and recommendation.

II. Review Of Issues

Conceptual Issues

Opinion Leadership

Summers as cited in Yan, J. (2013) defines opinion leadership as a process by which “some individuals exert a disproportionate amount of influence on the behaviour of others in some given topic areas”.

Rogers (1962) quoted in Shadid (2012) suggests “opinion leadership is to be viewed as a continuous variable even through it is disproportionately concentrated in a few individuals for a given topic area”.

Cosmas, C et al. (2012) defined an opinion leader as “someone whose opinions are highly respected and utilized by the respondents to help in making decisions across a variety of situations such as what types of clothes to wear, where to have major household items repaired, how to discipline the children and for whom to vote in political elections. This person can be someone with whom the respondents have personal contacts (a friend, priest, member of social group, relative, or someone in public life whose advice is derived from his/her public statements”.

Corey, L (1971) defines the term opinion leader as “trusted and informed people who exist in virtually all primary groups”. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) see the concept as “mediators between mass media and mass audience. Rogers and Mowen quoted in Yan, J (2013) define Opinion Leadership as the degree to which an individual is able to informally influence other individual’s behaviours, attitudes or overt behaviour in a desired way with relative frequency. It is noteworthy that opinion leaders could be influential at certain times on certain issues but not all the times and on all the issues.

Different studies have shown that men are more likely than women to be opinion leaders in the realm of public affairs because men have more chances to get outside the home to meet people and talk politics (Katz, 1957).

A middle aged, fairly educated man may be an opinion leader in politics while an elderly man with rich cultural experience could be an opinion leader in issues relating to culture. The Rovere study also discussed the flow of personal influence. It is also noteworthy that opinion leaders could be influential at certain times on certain issues but not all the times and on all the issues.

The subject matter or the topic of discourse has a lot to do with who will lead and who will follow. In politics says Katz, “the educated ones will lead while in traditional values, the older village man and in fashion and movies, the young ones. Therefore, a leader in one sphere may become a follower in another sphere.

Katz identified three factors that dictate influence as including:

1. Personification of certain values (who one is)
2. Competence (what one knows)
3. Strategic social location (whom one knows).

Characteristics of Opinion Leaders

Stephen C, et al. (2013) gave the following characteristics of opinion leaders:

1. Enjoys life
2. Has common sense
3. Utilizes you to test his or her ideas
4. Motivates you to follow his or her advice
5. Does not care what social group you associate with.
6. Belongs to the same social group as you do
7. Can easily evaluate you for what you are
8. Has a high degree of professionalism.
9. Has strong opinion on many things
10. Is not modest

11. Is down to earth, practical or pragmatic, not pretentions.
12. Gets jealous of other opinion leaders.
13. Has all round knowledge.
14. Evaluates you fairly.
15. Available when you need him or her
16. Looks like you
17. Expresses empathy towards others; identifies with them.
18. Is wealthy
19. Is mature
20. Makes you follow rules; enforces norms on you.
21. Quiet experienced about life.
22. Likes to give advice so others will do those things he or she is afraid to do
23. Not afraid to give an opinion.
24. Does not stand out in a crowd.

Ronald, E (1991) when conducting a validity study of a measure of opinion leadership, gave three determining factors in opinion leadership as including:

1. Expression of value
2. Professional competence
3. Nature of social network

Cosmas, S (1980) has merged all the attributes into 7 broad categories; Practical, Authoritarian, General Expert, Accessible, Peer Expert, Self-centered and Opinionated. Cosmas, C (1980) concludes that people within and across cultures do use some basic dimensions to evaluate their opinion leaders. Different cultures apply different degrees of importance.

Looking at opinion leadership from the angle of politics, Feick and Price quoted in Craig, C (2002) opines that involvement appears to be the predominant explanation for opinion leaders' conversations about politics. The study describes the opinion leader as the "interested and involved consumer that exerts influence over the attitudes and behaviours of others".

Voter's Behaviour

Wikipedia defines voting behaviour as a form of political behaviour that explains how and why decisions are made either by public decision makers and has been a central concern for political scientists and the electorate.

Ashley (2015) identifies certain factors that inform a voter's choice during elections. They include:

1. The Voter's background and identification with candidates.
2. The voter's party identification.
3. The voter's view of the incumbent's previous performance.

Ashley (2015) defines background as social identities such as class, ethnicity, gender, race and religious preference.

Ashley believes that most voters vote for candidates that seem most like them. For example, 95% of African-Americans who voted in 2008 voted for Barack Obama. In 1960, John F. Kennedy won with nearly 78% of Catholic voters casting their voters for Kennedy".

Party Identification

A voter's psychological attachment to a party is mostly based on whichever party affiliation mostly influenced their childhoods.

Incumbent's Performance

A voter's view of an incumbent's performance greatly influences that voter's decision. Wikipedia says certain factors such as gender, race, culture, religion, etc are key. Public influences also include the role of emotions, political socialization, tolerance of diversity of political views and the media.

Wikipedia says it "has been discovered that some emotive issues that do not have to do with substance may affect the voting decision.

Emotive issues such as anger, anxiety, fear, pride, etc can influence the voting decision of a voter. There is also the concept of issue voting where voters vote based on real issues of economy, immigration, workers rights, tax, gay rights, death penalty, etc. Ebube (2014) claimed that a poll by NOI Polls Limited found that 88% of the respondents said they would not be influenced by monetary inducement contrary to the widely held view that monetary inducement is a key factor in the voting decisions of many Nigerian voters. Ebube suggests that gratifications might not necessarily be as much relevant in determining the voter's choice in

Nigerian as often portrayed. Ebube also identified the traditional word of mouth campaign method and candidate's popularity as great determinants. Aluko, M (2002) submitted that "no matter how popular you are, your honour, reputation, integrity, records and desire to render selfless services if you do not have money, you are a joker. Elective posts usually go to the highest bidder". Proshare (2014) says three main factors that affect the voting behaviour of Nigerian voters are political aspirants, political parties and traditional media.

Simon, K (2015) categorizes the motivating factors of the Nigerian voters as:

1. Partisan and non-partisan

2. Interests and motivations:

The study categorizes interests as material, ideology, primordial and political affinity. It defines material interest as basically "stomach infrastructure". The study confirms that stomach infrastructure pulls a significant crowd in Nigeria. A small bag of rice and that is it. In any poor society, food is a big appetizer for people's loyalty".

Proshare (2014) also defines primordial interest as ethnic, regional or religious sentiments. It concludes that "the Nigerian electorate today is dominated by 'stomach' and primordial interests". Poverty, he says, "always makes material inducements a strong factor". He also opined that "primordial interest has the capacity to dilute the impact of 'stomach infrastructure' as earlier explained".

Ademuwagun (2015) submitted that "some people think Nigerians only vote based on ethnicity and religion, however, the voting behaviour is not so one-directional.

He identified six types of voters that are most prevalent in Nigeria:

1. The revolutionists
2. The partisans
3. The ethicists
4. The devotees
5. The sophisticated
6. The cynics

It is in line with the key factors distinguishing the Nigerian voters that this paper is examining the influence of the opinion leaders on the voting decision of the rural voters.

Characteristics of Rural Dwellers

Belshew (1965) defines ruralism as "a way of life that is traditionally oriented, linked with, but separate from urban centres, combining market activities with subsistence production".

Rural dwellers are said to constitute the majority of mankind and that "ruralism is synonymous with the general condition of underdevelopment in these countries".

Rogers (1968) found that "Asia, Africa and Latin America have a total of no less than 1.75 billion peasants" which means that no less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the population in most less developed countries are peasant rural dwellers. They suffer from acute low productivity, social and economic retrogression due mainly to ignorance which is also a direct consequence of either inadequate or lack of information provision to them. Hence, they have been excluded from active participation in national development efforts.

Adam (2011) writing on the information needs of rural women in Borno State declared that the rural women hardly seek information in a formal way through formal sources or channels like television or radio.

Theoretical Issues

The Two-Step-Flow hypothesis will serve as a theoretical basis for this study. The theory was developed by Lazarsfeld, et al. in 1944. The evidence of the 1940 voting study on America's presidential election led to the formulation of the hypothesis. It highlighted the impact of personal influence in reference to those who made up their minds late and those who changed their minds during the campaign. The two categories were more likely to mention personal influence as having figured prominently in their decisions. A lot of them said they participated in the discussion of the election than listening to a campaign speech or a newspaper editorial. They, therefore, concluded that personal contacts appear to have been both more frequent and more effective than mass media. Lazarsfeld et al. say "Ideas often flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from these to the less active sections of the population". Gutlin (1995) asserts that the thrust of this theory is that media messages reach people not so much directly as through the selective, partisan and complicating interpolation of opinion leaders.

The theory is one of the first theories of mass communication which recognized that many variables intervene to modify the effect of messages on audience response.

Katz (1957) documented that media messages first reach opinion leaders who in turn pass the message to their associates who look up to them for information. These opinion leaders, in the words of Baran and Davis (2003) also pass on their own interpretations in addition to the actual media content. It is also emphasized that the second stage in the formulation of the hypothesis was concerned with the flow of personal influence.

Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) asked if some people were more important in the transmission of influence. They discovered that opinion leaders were more interested in the election. They are found on every level of society and they share the same characteristics with the people they influence.

Other researches that stemmed out as a result of the two-step-flow include Merton's Study of Interpersonal Influence and Communication Behavior in Rovere. The Decatur Study of decision-making in marketing and the Elmira Study of the 1948 Elections.

The Rovere study tried to identify who opinion leaders were while the Decatur and Elmira studies revealed that the opinion leaders themselves often confessed that their own decisions were still influenced by other.

Katz (1957), therefore, opined that it then became apparent to think about the opinion leaders of opinion leaders. This has made some scholars to talk about the multi-step flow.

Katz (1957) emphasized that the 1940 study showed that personal influence affected voting decisions more than the mass media did, especially for those who changed their mind during the campaigns. The study also discovered a high degree of homogeneity of political opinion among members of the same primary groups: families, co-workers and friends.

III. Methodology

This paper adopted the survey research method. This paper cannot be empirical enough if the views of the residents of Ayetoro are not gathered. Ayetoro is made up of nine quarters. 20 copies each of the questionnaire were administered in all the nine quarters, giving a total of 180 copies of the questionnaire. The entire adult men and women constitute the population of study. However, a sample size of 180 was chosen. Simple random and purposive sampling techniques are adopted by the study.

Research Questions

This study came up with the following research questions.

1. What is the relationship between opinion leaders and voting decisions of the electorate?
2. Are voters more influenced by opinion leaders or by the mass media?
3. Do opinion leaders use monetary incentives to change voting decisions of voters?
4. What is the relationship between an opinion leader's credibility and his/her ability to change the voting decisions of the voters?

IV. Data Analysis & Discussion Of Findings

Out of 180 questionnaires, only 150 copies were found useful. The data showed that majority of the respondents with 34.6% did not have formal education. This conforms to Selah's findings that there is a high rate of illiteracy among rural dwellers.

Table 1. Education Distribution

Qualifications	Responses	Percentages %
Primary Sch. Certificate	18	12
Secondary Certificate	40	26.6
Grade II Certificate	10	6.8
OND	12	8
HND/BSC	18	12
M.Sc. & above	0	0
None	52	34.6
Total	150	100

Source: field survey, 2015

Interpretation: 20 % of the respondents possess post-secondary qualification, no of them has Master and Ph.D. 35% of the respondents did not go to school at all. While 45% of the respondents possess primary, secondary and grade II certificates.

Table 2. Through which of the following did you know about the candidates you voted for.

Frequency	Responses	Percentages %
Radio	22	14.7
Television	15	10
Politicians	89	59.3
Pastors/Baales/Comm. Leaders	24	16
Total	150	100

Source: field survey, 2015

Interpretation: the study also showed that interpersonal sources formed the bulk of their sources of political information with the majority getting to know about candidates through politicians and community leaders as opposed to radio and television.

Table 3: Did you vote during the last election?

Frequency	Response	Percentages %
Yes	124	82.7
No	26	17.3
Total	150	100

Source: field survey 2015.

Interpretation: The research also showed that the people are politically active with 83% saying they voted during the 2015 elections.

Table 4. Which of the following do you always turn to for advice/information on politics?

Frequency	Responses	Percentages %
Pastors/Imams	32	21.3
Baale	9	6.6
Community leaders	82	54.7
Husband/Wife	22	14.7
Your Sons/Daughter	5	3.3
Total	150	100

Source: field survey, 2015

Interpretation: the study also revealed that majority of the respondents said they always turned to community leaders for political information than going to religious leaders. The study also showed that 75% of the respondents believed their community and religious leaders more than other sources of political information.

Table 5: For which of the following reasons do you go to them for advice on politics?

Frequency	Responses	Percentages %
They are educated	25	16.7
They are current	42	28
They are truthful	69	46
They are rich	5	3.3
Other(specify)	9	6
Total	150	100

Source: field survey, 2015

Interpretation: Majority of the respondents also claimed that they always turned to community and religious leaders because they felt they were truthful.

Table 6: Were you offered financial inducement?

Frequency	Response	Percentages %
Yes	65	43.3
No	85	56.7
Total	150	100

Source: field survey, 2015

Interpretation: 57% of the respondents said they were offered financial inducement. The inducement was offered mostly by politicians themselves.

Table 7: If yes, through which of the following did they offer you gift

Frequency	Responses	Percentages %
Baales	28	18.7
Pastors/Imams	16	10.7
Community leaders	42	28
Politicians	64	42.6
Total	150	100

Source: field survey, 2015

Interpretation: The above result shows that 10.7% constituting religious leaders and 28% constituting community leaders were also used to offer inducements. Almost 19% of the respondents confirmed that Baales also serve as the tool of perpetrating unjust inducement.

Table 8: If you received a gift, did it make you vote for the candidates?

Frequency	Response	Percentages %
Yes	88	58.7
No	62	41.3
Total	150	100

Source: field survey 2015

Interpretation: It is also revealed that 59% of the respondents are influenced in their voting decisions by the inducement.

Table 9: Do you search for information on who to vote for?

Frequency	Response	Percentages %
Yes	61	40.7
No	89	59.3
Total	150	100

Source: field survey, 2015

Interpretation: Majority constituting 59% of the respondents also confirmed that they did not search for information on who to vote for, meaning that most of them voted on the advice/instruction of their leaders.

V. Conclusion And Recommendation

It is safe to conclude from the findings that majority of the respondents were not well-educated to make informed voting decisions. Therefore, they depended on the opinion leaders for political decisions. Second, despite the fact that the people were politically active, they still depend more on informal sources than formal sources or channels such as radio and television for political information. Third, some of them turned to the community and religious leaders because of their perceived credibility. Fourth, that 40% said that monetary inducement influenced their voting decision meant that poverty and illiteracy negatively influenced the voting decision of the people.

That 43% of the inducement came from politicians meant that politicians were desperate to win at all cost because they were unpopular or because they considered the people as lacking the capacity to make informed decisions.

The influence of opinion leaders in this community is enormous as people who are relatively educated still consult opinion leaders on voting decisions. The fact that some of the opinion leaders like pastors, bales, etc were also used to offer inducements to the respondents meant that some of the opinion leaders lacked credibility.

The research work, therefore, recommends that government should provide an efficient information delivery mechanism that would guide the voting decisions of the people. The information delivery mechanism must be one that will take special cognizance of the information needs of the rural communities.

Since the influence of opinion leaders in the rural communities is enormous, government and electoral bodies like INEC should evolve a communication channel that would be targeted at the conscience of the opinion leaders so that they can credibly and truthfully guide the voting decisions of the people. Since a good number of people said monetary inducement influenced their choice of candidates, the government has the responsibility to come up with stringent punishment for those who offer inducements. Alternatively, the government should strengthen and make effective the poverty alleviation programmes for the rural dwellers as the level of poverty in the rural communities may be a major factor for acceptance of such offers.

Professional communicators also have a role to play. Since radio is a good medium to reach the rural dwellers, media professionals are advised to come up with politically educative enlightenment programmes that rural dwellers would find appealing. This will reduce the influence of the opinion leaders, some of who deliberately misinform the rural voters for selfish reasons.

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